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COORDINATION AND INTEGRATION OF INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL PROGRAMMES

Report of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination on its fourteenth session

SUMMARY

At its fourteenth session, the Working Group decided to issue amendments to the Standard International Trade Classification, Revision 3, in the light of the amendments to the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System scheduled for implementation in January 1992 (paras. 4-7), reviewed work under way and planned on the reconciliation of international trade statistics and estimates (paras. 8-11), reviewed progress and plans on the revision of the System of National Accounts and made decisions aimed at ensuring that the timetable for completing the review would be adhered to (paras. 12-19). It followed up on the consideration by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session of the item entitled "Effects of structural adjustment programmes and the debt burden on the work programmes of national and international statistical services" (paras. 20-23), reviewed coordination of the statistical data-collection activities of international organizations (paras. 24-29), considered the question of evaluation of the survey programmes of the United Nations and the World Bank (paras. 30-35), reviewed and finalized the provisional agenda for the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission (paras. 36-46), made recommendations concerning special topics to be considered by the Statistical Commission at its sessions after 1993 (paras. 47-49) and made decisions concerning the documentation for the

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twenty-seventh session of the Commission and its content (paras. 50-69), considered initiatives being undertaken by international organizations to accelerate statistical development while ensuring coordination in selected fields of statistics (paras. 70-71), and made decisions aimed at strengthening international statistical cooperation and development (paras. 72-82).

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INTRODUCTION

1. The fourteenth session of the Working Group on International Statistical Programmes and Coordination of the Statistical Commission was held at Geneva from 17 to 20 September 1991. The agenda, as adopted, is contained in the annex to the present report.

2. In accordance with the decision of the Statistical Commission, the officers elected at the twenty-sixth session of the Commission who attended the Working Group meeting served as officers of the Working Group, with W. Begeer (Netherlands) acting as Chairman of the session. Other members present were: Eduardo A. de Almeida Guimaraes (Brazil), E. Oti Boateng (Ghana), Majid Jamshidi (Islamic Republic of Iran), Hiroyasu Kudo (Japan), J. A. Mwaniki (Kenya), E. Sojo (Mexico), and Hermann Habermann (United States of America). At the invitation of the Chairman, the following observers were present: B. Prigly (Canada) and S. Johansson (Sweden).

3. The following were represented: Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, Economic Commission for Europe (ECE), United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), International Labour Organisation (ILO), Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), World Health Organization (WHO), World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), Customs Cooperation Council (CCC), Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) and the European Economic Community (EEC). Ms. C. Carson, an expert on national accounts, was also present.

I. AMENDMENTS TO THE STANDARD INTERNATIONAL TRADE CLASSIFICATION, REVISION 3

4. The Working Group considered the matter of amendments to SITC, Rev.3, in light of the amendments to the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS) scheduled for implementation in January 1992, on the basis of a note by the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.5 and Add.1), supplemented by an oral report from the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, outlining the implications for the SITC, Rev.3, of the amendments to the HS which would be effective as from 1 January 1992.

5. The Working Group noted the strict correlation that had been established between the HS and SITC, Rev.3, and recalled the Statistical Commission's view that it was important to maintain the correlation between the two classifications. 1/ The Working Group also recalled the Statistical Commission's view that too frequent changes in statistical classifications were not desirable. 1/ However, decisions had already been made by CCC to issue amendments to the HS, and countries using the HS would implement those changes in 1992. It was desirable that countries and organizations which needed to convert trade data from the HS to the SITC should be provided with a standard correlation in order to ensure continuing comparability of

international trade data after the HS changes were introduced. The Working Group also noted that more recent analysis by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat indicated that the changes in the HS affected a larger number of items in the SITC than had been indicated by the preliminary work reflected in E/CN.3/AC.3/1991/R.5 and Add.1.

6. The Working Group decided that the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat should issue amendments to the SITC, Rev.3, in light of the amendments to HS. The amendments should be effective 1 January 1992, the date when the amendments to the HS would come into effect. The Working Group also agreed that necessary corrections to the SITC, Rev.3, publication should also be incorporated into the amendments.

7. The Working Group also gave initial consideration to the overall future relationship between the SITC and the HS. The Working Group was informed that HS would be revised effective 1 January 1996 to reflect changes in technology and product mixes in international trade, and that raised the question of further revision to the SITC. The Working Group requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to include in its already scheduled report to the Statistical Commission on international trade statistics a report of the situation, including:

(a) Information on the nature and scale of the planned revision to HS;

(b) The relative benefits of the two classifications for various purposes, such as initial data collection and classification purposes, market analyses and general economic analysis, and analytical work;

(c) The need for long-term time series and problems in continuity in such series resulting from changes in classifications;

(d) Resource requirements for various possible alternatives for work on the revision of the SITC.

The Working Group requested the Statistical Office and GATT to prepare jointly the report on the SITC and HS.

II. RECONCILIATION OF INTERNATIONAL TRADE STATISTICS AND ESTIMATES

8. The Working Group considered the matter on the basis of an oral report from the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, describing steps taken by the Office and IMF on reconciling aggregate import and export data compiled by both organizations and work by a number of involved international organizations on improving and reconciling the methodologies for making estimates of international trade flows.

9. The Working Group welcomed the report on the reconciliation work and the plan to extend it over time to reconciliation with similar data maintained by

other organizations and for other series of trade data. The Working Group noted the current long-standing arrangements between the Statistical Office and IMF for collection and publication of aggregate trade data which had evolved from the different country coverage for the two organizations because of different membership, different treatment of national data based on the different needs and policies of the two organizations, and publication of the data in different forms to meet user needs. The Working Group noted that a survey of user needs had been conducted by the Statistical Office, the results of which might give guidance on future publication practices.

10. The issue of adjusting nationally supplied data on international trade to conform to United Nations concepts and definitions was raised in the discussion of trade statistics, but it was recognized as having broader application and was discussed in that broader context. Several organizations described their practices and rationales concerning publication of nationally reported data, adjusting national data by estimating components to conform more closely to international standards and preparing and publishing estimates for missing data. The practices of the different agencies varied and were evolving, especially where sound methodologies had been developed. The Working Group recommended that the Statistical Commission should consider whether the Statistical Office and other organizations should prepare and publish estimates in various fields of statistics to supplement nationally supplied data or adjust national data by estimating components to conform to standards.

11. The Working Group also touched upon publication policies generally, including the publication of the same series in publications of more than one organization, and decided to consider the matter further under agenda item 5, "Strengthening international statistical cooperation".

III. REVISION OF THE SYSTEM OF NATIONAL ACCOUNTS

12. The Working Group considered the matter on the basis of a note (E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.2) containing a progress report prepared by the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on National Accounts, an oral report from the Director of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and an oral report from Ms. C. Carson, who had been appointed by the Statistical Commission to work with the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on National Accounts to help in meeting the timetable for completion of the SNA review.

13. Ms. Carson reported that the drafting tasks of the revised SNA, which had been assigned to a primary drafter, Mr. P. Hill, were, at the half-way mark in a one-year consultancy, six to eight weeks behind the schedule that had been established by the Inter-Secretariat Working Group in April 1991. Drafting of some chapters had been assigned to alternate drafters, and a search was continuing for additional drafting assistance. The first chapter was expected to be ready for processing (translation, printing, distribution) by the end of September. Drafting of other parts of the revised SNA (chapters, annexes etc.) by various drafters was just beginning to be far enough along to tell whether the work was on schedule.

14. She further reported that the Inter-Secretariat Working Group had agreed in June on the broad purposes of the interregional meeting scheduled for Mexico in May 1992 - namely, explanation and identification of country or regional situations that require elaboration; implementation of the revised SNA; and areas for further methodological work in the field of national accounts once the revised SNA is adopted. The Inter-Secretariat Working Group had also agreed that the regional commissions would play an important part in the process of communication between it and the participants at the meeting, including providing feedback to the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on the views of participants. The Group would soon need to address further arrangements for the meeting, including the list of participants.

15. Although the members of the Inter-Secretariat Working Group had already provided major resources to the SNA review and those resources had been recognized at the last session of the Statistical Commission, they were currently providing additional resources by assuming responsibility for drafting chapters, as mentioned above. A follow-up fund-raising effort in May had been successful in securing additional commitments of resources, in cash and in kind, from a number of countries.

16. In addition, Ms. Carson reported that she and the Inter-Secretariat Working Group had acted with the concerns expressed by the Statistical Commission 2/ in mind - namely, all were committed to meeting the 1993 target date set by the Commission; the procedures set by the Statistical Commission for resolving issues had been used; the number of meetings had been limited and expanded use was being made of electronic means of communication; high priority had been assigned to the work on two handbooks (the handbook on the SNA for transition countries and the handbook on accounting for economic activity under conditions of high inflation); and the drafting of a multilingual list of key national accounts terms had been completed.

17. Ms. Carson expressed three concerns to the Working Group. First, unless the additional drafting assistance set out in paragraph 13 above was obtained, the drafting of chapters originally assigned to Mr. Hill would not be completed on time. Secondly, as the deadlines neared and the work of all drafters started to come in, coordination would become more complex. The need for drafters to deliver according to schedule would become critical because of the interconnections between the various elements of the drafts and because of the time requirements for translation, printing and distribution in time for the interregional meeting in May 1992 and then for the Statistical Commission. Ms. Carson expressed concern that some drafters, under pressure of other commitments, could let their work on the revised SNA slip. Taking the two points together, Ms. Carson considered that the viable alternative was to trim or downsize the planned output and refinements in the hope of meeting the timetable. That choice would place more urgency on the preparation of manuals and handbooks. Thirdly, the organization of the interregional meeting had gotten off to a slower-than-hoped-for start. Ms. Carson concluded that in the coming months the task would be even more difficult than it had been in the past six months.

18. It was agreed that it was not appropriate at the time to suggest specific action to be taken in downsizing. Concern was expressed that it was essential to complete preparation of the documentation, including translations for the interregional meeting, and to get the documentation to participants well in advance, to ensure the necessary feedback. The Working Group noted the arrangements that had been made by the Inter-Secretariat Working Group for distributing the chapters of the revised SNA. They included sending each chapter as completed to the experts who would attend the interregional meeting and sending chapters on a grouped basis to national statistical offices. The approach had been adopted for practical purposes, because of the scale of mailing that would otherwise be required.

19. The Working Group expressed its thanks to Ms. C. Carson for the detailed oral report, to the organizations and countries which were contributing resources in cash and kind (and those which were potential donors), and to the authors and organizations for the way in which they had conducted the work. It thanked Ms. Carson especially for her significant contributions in working with the Inter-Secretariat Working Group. It reconfirmed the insistence expressed unanimously by the Statistical Commission "that the target date of 1993 for completion of the work be strictly adhered to"; 3/ and decided that, if necessary, in order to meet the target date, the draft of the revised SNA to be submitted to the Commission should be downsized by eliminating portions of the planned text. Decisions on downsizing should be made by the Inter-Secretariat Working Group, as necessary and based on developments, the Group should delegate that function to Ms. Carson. The Working Group, moreover, considered that areas in the revised SNA needing additional clarification should be identified so that work could be planned with a view to the future updating of the SNA. The Group requested the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on National Accounts to prepare an interim report on the revision, including any decisions made as to downsizing. The report would serve, inter alia, as part of the preparations for the interregional meeting.

IV. EFFECTS OF STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT PROGRAMMES AND THE DEBT BURDEN ON THE WORK PROGRAMMES OF NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL SERVICES

20. The Working Group considered the item on the basis of a note by the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.3) summarizing comments of national statistical offices in developing countries, the report of the Secretary-General to the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session (E/CN.3/1991/4), statements made by the representatives of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, and the relevant section of the report of the Commission. 4/

21. The Working Group welcomed the note of the Secretary-General which, because it included a significantly greater number of responses than the report to the Statistical Commission, was much fuller and more balanced. The respondents, in general, hesitated to establish a precise relationship between structural adjustment programmes and the debt burden, on the one hand, and the

work programmes of national statistical offices, on the other. However, there appeared to be genuine concern about the impact of reductions in statistical resources on the possibilities of providing the data needed for long-term economic and social development. The Working Group, considering adequate statistical information a necessary tool for economic and social development, endorsed that concern.

22. Given the important role of statistics, as set out in paragraph 13 of the report, the Working Group decided to bring its concern to the attention of the Statistical Commission, with a recommendation that the Commission bring it to the attention of relevant intergovernmental bodies so that they might take it into account in their fields of responsibility. At the same time, the Working Group also recognized that structural adjustment programmes and other development initiatives called for a wide range of timely and appropriate statistics. The new need for data gave national statistical offices an opportunity to raise their profiles and expand the resources available to them. The Working Group requested that the concerns and opportunities expressed in the report be addressed by the international organizations in formulating future statistical work programmes, especially in relation to standards, methods and technical cooperation programmes in order to deal with problems at the country level better.

23. The Working Group took note of the section of the report on the statistical implications of the United Nations Development Strategy for the Fourth United Nations Development Decade (paras. 15-17). It felt that the Statistical Commission would need to give the matter further consideration during the Decade on the basis of fuller information.

V. COORDINATION OF THE STATISTICAL DATA-COLLECTION ACTIVITIES OF INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS

24. The Working Group considered the item on the basis of a note by the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.7) entitled "Inventory of statistical data collection activities", which contained a summary of the major changes that had occurred in international statistical data-collection activities in the past two years, coordination arrangements for statistical data-collection and sharing among the international organizations and a brief description of the data collected from countries by questionnaires, magnetic tape and diskette.

25. The Working Group noted that efforts had been made to improve the report in the ways put forward by it at its twelfth session (E/CN.3/1989/20, para. 53 (c)). It had suggested that the report should, as far as possible, include all statistical questionnaires, even if the data collected served only a limited purpose, and that the descriptions of the questionnaires be more detailed in covering such factors as classifications, units of measurement, and time period coverage of data requested. The Working Group welcomed the inclusion in the present inventory of responses to the suggestions made by the Working Group at its thirteenth session (E/CN.3/1991/2, paras. 77, 78) to

include information on the extent to which tailoring of questionnaires was done by the various organizations and the extent of data collection through microcomputers. The report indicated that several organizations reported that they did tailor questionnaires - i.e., request less detailed data from countries considered to be less statistically developed. In addition, six out of 12 organizations responded that they used microcomputer technology in a variety of ways for data collection.

26. The Working Group welcomed the report and the coordination arrangements that had been developed and described in the report and noted that the description of questionnaires would be reviewed by the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, to try to identify situations of unnecessary potential duplication of collection. The Working Group felt that the report was a very useful tool for both national offices and international organizations and requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to circulate it to national statistical offices and international organizations, as it had done with previous editions of the report, inviting them to comment on its usefulness to them and to report any apparent duplications in requests that they might receive from international organizations. Noting that the existence of the report was not well known internationally, the Working Group requested the Statistical Office to explore ways to disseminate it more widely.

27. The Working Group also received an oral report from the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat on coordination of ad hoc requests to member States for statistics from non-statistical units of the United Nations and other international organizations. The Working Group was informed that:

(a) The Statistical Commission had expressed concern at its twenty-fourth session on the growth of ad hoc requests to member States for statistical information from non-statistical units of the United Nations and other organizations. A progress report on the subject was submitted to the Statistical Commission at its twenty-fifth session (New York, 6-15 February 1989; see E/CN.3/1989/22, annex, paras. 13-17);

(b) After reviewing the report at its twenty-fifth session, the Commission had "recognized that considerable success had been achieved in coordination ... in ad hoc requests for statistics directed to Member States by non-statistical units of the United Nations and other international organizations"; 5/

(c) Most organizations had instituted procedures for review of the questionnaires. In most cases, the procedures required that questionnaires and other requests for statistical data be cleared by the statistics division or a committee including representation from the statistics division before they could be sent to member States;

(d) Several organizations had reported their experiences in implementing their review procedures. They reported reviewing various numbers of requests but recognized that they could not be certain that compliance was complete;

(e) In the past two years, since the coordination mechanisms were introduced, no problems in that regard had been brought to the attention of the Statistical Office or raised in the meetings of the ACC Sub-Committee on Statistical Activities. In June 1990 when the Sub-Committee reviewed the situation, it noted that for most organizations there had been no new problems or need for initiatives in that field in the past year.

28. The Working Group expressed its satisfaction with the steps taken and results achieved and requested the international organizations either to continue their review arrangements or to introduce such arrangements, if they were not already in place.

29. The Working Group also requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, when circulating the inventory to national statistical offices, to request them to inform it of any problems they experienced.

VI. EVALUATION OF THE SURVEY PROGRAMMES OF THE UNITED NATIONS AND THE WORLD BANK

30. The Working Group considered the matter on the basis of a statement from the Chairman, who recalled that, at its twenty-sixth session, the Commission had discussed how it or the Working Group might be able to provide a mechanism that would permit an independent evaluation of the National Household Survey Capability Programme (NHSCP) of the United Nations and the Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA) programme and the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS) of the World Bank. 6/ The Chairman indicated that, to date, the resources had not become available to finance the evaluation. Experience had shown that evaluation in those areas involved a range of complex issues. For example, there were both statistical issues and broader issues involved, and consequently the extent to which the Statistical Commission should properly involve itself needed to be determined. The scope of any evaluation also needed clarification. The Chairman also observed that a review of the United Nations Development Programme Interim Evaluation Report on the SDA programme and the comments of the sponsoring agencies highlighted the complex nature of the programme, which encompassed many non-survey and data elements. 7/

31. The Working Group noted that, although the issue was a global one, there was particular interest in the situation in Africa and there had been significant developments since the session of the Commission relating to the development and conduct of SDA and to a strategy for the development of statistics in the 1990s in Africa, deriving from the Addis Ababa Plan of Action for Statistical Development in Africa in the 1990s. The developments were positive: some misunderstandings had been clarified; contact between the World Bank and countries and with the Economic Commission for Africa had been intensified; the Statistics Sub-Committee of the Steering Committee of SDA had been enlarged and included directors of national statistical offices of many African countries; the leadership role of directors of the national statistical offices had been enhanced; and several meetings had been held (and others were planned) in Africa on SDA and general statistical development programmes.

32. The Working Group also noted that, deriving from the Addis Ababa Plan of Action, ECA had recently elaborated a strategy for the development of statistics in Africa in the 1990s. Other developments included draft proposals for statistical capacity-building by the World Bank and the Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques (INSEE) of France. The Working Group requested ECA and the World Bank to provide a joint paper incorporating their respective views for the Statistical Commission at its twenty-seventh session, as background information.

33. The Working Group considered a number of factors relevant to carrying out an evaluation:

(a) Resource constraints and the competition for funding for many important activities;

(b) Uncertainty about the intended scope of the evaluation;

(c) Recent positive developments;

(d) Relevant discussions planned for the 1992 session of the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians and Demographers;

(e) Other data-collection activities under way or planned - for example, the Demographic and Health Survey (DHS), the Inter-Agency Food and Nutrition Surveillance Programme (IFNS), and the new UNFPA African Survey Programme;

(f) The desire to avoid producing an evaluation study that would turn out to be unnecessary or inappropriate in coverage.

Consequently, the Working Group decided not to proceed with an evaluation but to request clarification from the Statistical Commission on the continuing need for an evaluation and its coverage, based on new information to be reported to the Commission. The Working Group decided to consider the appropriate documentation for the Commission during its discussion of agenda item 6.

34. The Working Group encouraged members to exchange ideas on the question of an evaluation so as to facilitate discussion at the session of the Commission in 1993.

35. The Working Group also considered some aspects of technical cooperation in statistics generally - coordination and improved methods of reporting - and decided to consider the documentation question further during discussion of agenda item 6.

VII. PROVISIONAL AGENDA AND DOCUMENTATION FOR THE TWENTY-SEVENTH SESSION OF THE STATISTICAL COMMISSION

36. The Working Group considered the matter on the basis of a note (E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.4) by the Secretary-General containing proposals relating to the provisional agenda and documentation for the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission.

A. Agenda

1. Fundamental restructuring

37. The Working Group noted that several proposals for a fundamental restructuring of the agenda for the Commission at its twenty-seventh session had been made by individual participants at the twenty-sixth session. 8/ The Working Group thought that the issue was basically one of how best to arrange the agenda to promote the Commission's ability to carry out its major functions within the constraints imposed by such factors as the number of days assigned for the session and limits on documentation. It also recalled the various initiatives that had been tried with structuring the agendas of the Statistical Commission in previous years to help make the discussion at the session as useful as possible. The initiatives had included placing some general topics at the beginning, identifying items that were for discussion and others that were for information only, and identifying "special issues" for consideration. The experiences with those initiatives had been mixed.

38. The Working Group felt that, although a fundamental restructuring of the agenda was not necessary, a number of changes could usefully be introduced. In particular there was agreement that a new effort should be made to identify items or sub-items that were expected to be either for discussion or for information. The Working Group made the following classifications:

Items for discussion		Items for information	
3	Special topic		
4 (a), 4 (b)	SNA		
5 (a), 5 (b)	Classifications		
6*	Industrial	6*	
7	Services		
8	Prices		
9 (a)*, 9 (d)	Demographic and social	9 (a)*, 9 (b), 9 (c)	Demographic and social

Items for discussion		Items for information
10*	Environment	10*
11	Tourism	
12 (a)*	General development of methodology	12 (a)*
12 (b)*	Development indicators	12 (b)*
13 (a)	Technical cooperation	
13 (b)*	NHSCP	3 (b)*
13 (c)*	SDA and LSMS	13 (c)*
13 (d)	Monitoring social goals	
14	Coordination	
15 (a)*	Programme implementation	15 (a)*
15 (b)	Programme planning	

* Part of item.

39. The Working Group asked the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to include the classifications in the agenda, but it was recognized that when participants wished to discuss an item, they could not be prevented from doing so.

40. The Working Group decided to bring forward discussion of the proposed revisions of the medium-term plan of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to an earlier stage of the proceedings than in the past, to allow more time for its consideration by the maximum number of participants. It was expected to be closely related to matters that were likely to be discussed under the special topic, item 3.

41. The Working Group stressed that the structure of the agenda and the availability of documentation needed to be combined with more focused, issue-oriented and succinct interventions by those participating in the discussions. It emphasized that detailed expositions of methodology or the reporting of routine activities should be avoided. The Working Group requested the Chairman of the Statistical Commission at its twenty-seventh session to bring those matters to the attention of participants.

2. Development indicators

42. Since the twenty-sixth session of the Commission, an expert meeting on the subject of development indicators had been held in Morocco (April 1991). A report on the meeting had been submitted to the Economic and Social Council by the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), and the Council had adopted resolution 1991/94, in which it, inter alia, requested the Statistical Commission "to keep the issue of patterns of consumption and qualitative indicators of development under consideration".

43. The Working Group decided to include development indicators on the agenda for the twenty-seventh session of the Commission as sub-item 12 (b). In addition to the basic document to be prepared by UNRISD in cooperation with the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, the Working Group also requested the Statistical Office to submit a note on issues relating to monitoring in relation to the International Development Strategy under the sub-item.

3. Proposed sub-item structure

44. The Sub-Committee endorsed the sub-item structure for the agenda proposed by the Secretariat in paragraph 3 of E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.4.

4. Special topic

45. The Working Group decided to select as special topics issues that were expected to derive from discussion of item 5 of the Working Group agenda "Strengthening international statistical cooperation" (see paras. 72-82).

5. Overall

46. The Working Group endorsed the provisional agenda that had been approved by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session and by the Economic and Social Council at its second regular session of 1991 (decision 1991/310), with the modifications mentioned above.

B. Special topics after 1993

47. The Working Group considered the "consolidated list of special topics" set out in section III of document E/CN.3/AC.1/1991/R.4, with a view to identifying possible topics for consideration by the Statistical Commission at sessions after the one in 1993. Two topics were identified - namely "Statistical education and training" and "National and international statistical issues resulting from the emergence of customs and economic unions". The first topic would cover countries at various levels of statistical development in different areas of the world and in a variety of

emerging situations. The Working Group felt that the first topic should also include consideration of the combined statistical and managerial skills required for senior management in national statistical offices. The Working Group welcomed an offer by Statistics Canada to prepare a document on the issue. The two special issues were judged to be interesting, timely and to have significant impact on statistics and statistical systems.

48. Broad interest was expressed in including as a special topic "the statistical issues of countries in transition to market economies", a subject of relevance to countries in several regions of the world, especially in relation to SNA. The Working Group decided to consider the issues as part of its consideration of item 4 (b), "Implementation of the Revised System of National Accounts", on the agenda of the twenty-seventh session of the Commission.

49. The Working Group decided to discontinue the existing consolidated list and to identify additional special topics for the future based on concerns and interests prevailing at that time.

C. Documentation

50. The Working Group reiterated the points made by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session concerning the need for documentation for the twenty-seventh session to be available on time. 9/ The Working Group recognized the processes involved in drafting, editing, translating and printing the documents in the required languages, the overall workload on all the United Nations services involved, and the policies and priorities established within the United Nations. The Working Group emphasized the need for all documents in all languages to be available on a timely basis but recommended unanimously that documents be released in the various languages as they became available rather than be held for simultaneous release. That practice would facilitate the necessary review in the national statistical offices in advance of the Commission sessions.

51. The Working Group approved the outlines and descriptive notes of the documents for each agenda item set out in the note of the Secretary-General and provided orally, with a number of additions, changes and comments, which are set out below. Members of the Working Group were encouraged to send, in writing, any additional comments they might have on documentation directly to the Statistical Office by 30 October 1991 to allow the Office to take account of the comments and, if necessary, consult with the Chairman.

1. Item 3. Special topic

52. The Working Group decided to defer a decision until after discussion of item 5 of the Working Group's agenda, "Strengthening international statistical cooperation" (see paras. 72-82 below).

2. Item 4. National accounts and balances

53. The Working Group noted that the outlines had been developed in consultation with the Inter-Secretariat Working Group on National Accounts. With respect to the document on the revision of SNA, the Working Group emphasized that it should serve to focus the discussion of the Commission and requested that the outline be adjusted for that purpose by identifying the main changes and identifying areas for further methodological work in national accounts after the revised SNA had been adopted. The Working Group noted that the revised SNA itself would also include an annex describing changes from the 1968 SNA. Section V of the report should also cover questions of substance in addition to mechanisms for keeping future revised SNA guidelines up to date.

54. With respect to the document on implementation, the Working Group requested that special attention be given to implementation in transition countries or countries currently or formerly using the System of Balances of the National Economy (MPS). The Working Group also requested that information be included on any resources committed for implementation, that efforts be made to identify potential sources of assistance and that funding possibilities with them be explored. It also requested that proposals be set out on planned methods to raise resources for implementation. The Working Group recognized that organizing funding in advance of action by the Commission on the revised SNA would be quite difficult. The Working Group confirmed that the priority was to complete the SNA on time but nevertheless felt that efforts to plan work beyond 1993, including implementation and its funding, were also expected.

55. With regard to the document on the informal sector to be prepared by ILO, the Working Group noted that the report would address the question of how to delineate the informal sector from the rest of the economy. The document was most relevant to the agenda item as the question would also be addressed in the revised SNA. The Working Group noted that a strategy of how to proceed had to be decided given the conflicting timetables of finalization of the revised SNA by the Statistical Commission and consideration of the related issues on the informal sector by the International Conference of Labour Statisticians.

3. Item 5 (a). Implementation of the International Standard Industrial Classification of All Economic Activities, Revision 3 (ISIC, Rev.3) and the provisional Central Product Classification (CPC)

56. The Working Group agreed to the proposed changes in the title of the document requested, to "Report on the implementation of the ISIC, Rev.3, and the provisional CPC" (see E/CN.1/AC.1/1991/R.4, para. 7 (a)). The Working Group requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to include in section V information on related current and planned work of other international organizations and to address under implementation of ISIC the issue of how best to provide guidance on the coding of "industry" in surveys and population and housing censuses.

57. The Working Group also decided to include under that agenda item a consideration of SITC and HS consequent to the planned introduction of the revised HS on 1 January 1996, on the basis of the document requested by the Working Group during its discussion under item 7 (a) of its agenda and which the Working Group requested be prepared jointly by the Statistical Office and GATT.

4. Item 6. Industrial statistics

58. The Working Group requested the Statistical Office to expand the coverage of the paper to address broader aspects of industrial statistics, including current statistics beyond the 1993 World Programme, to provide for a preliminary discussion on needs for current industrial statistics at the twenty-seventh session of the Commission. The Working Group considered that the subject of current industrial statistics could then receive a more complete discussion at the twenty-eighth session of the Commission. Discussion would also be invited on section III, dealing with technical cooperation needs for the 1993 World Programme. Other elements of the report would be for information only.

5. Item 7. Service statistics

59. The Working Group requested that the report include information on the current and planned methodological work being carried out in a wide range of international organizations, including IMF, UNCTAD, OECD and Eurostat, on service statistics, in order to help disseminate information on service statistics. It noted that information on the work of the Voorburg Group on Service Statistics would be included. The Working Group also noted that there were both substantive and procedural questions to be addressed on the work of the Voorburg Group, in particular the applicability of the results of the Group's work and the coordination of its work with the work of others. The Working Group agreed that the report of its discussion of the matter should be transmitted to the Voorburg Group for their information and possible action.

60. The Working Group noted that section V would contain the planned work of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat which would be developed, taking account of what was being done and planned by other organizations, as set out in section III. That would provide a good basis for looking at the overall plans of all the organizations during the Commission session.

6. Item 8. Price statistics

61. The Working Group requested that the report be expanded to discuss other methodological work on such issues as sample design and quality comparison issues and how the integration of ICP work into national programmes could be promoted. The Working Group welcomed an offer from the World Bank to collaborate with the Statistical Office in preparing the report. The report would make clear where the views of the two organizations differed.

7. Item 9. Demographic and social statistics

62. The Working Group decided that sub-item 9 (d) and the part of sub-item 9 (a) dealing with emerging issues and needs for the 2000 World Population and Housing Census Programme should be for discussion, and sub-items 9 (b) and 9 (c) for information.

8. Sub-item 12 (b). Development indicators

63. It was made clear that the sub-item included economic, human and social aspects of development. The Working Group requested UNRISD to prepare an outline for a report and give it to the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat for circulation to members of the Working Group for comment and subsequent consultation with the Chairman. The Working Group noted that a background document from the Statistical Office on monitoring in relation to the International Development Strategy would be available. The document was considered to be mainly for information. The Working Group decided that the document on monitoring the achievement of social goals in the 1990s and related monitoring work listed under sub-item 13 (d) should also be listed under sub-item 12 (b), because it included elements relevant to both methodological development and technical cooperation.

9. Sub-item 13 (a). Technical cooperation in statistics

64. The Working Group welcomed the plan of the Economic Commission for Africa and the World Bank to prepare a joint paper, for background information, on overall statistical development in Africa, drawing on discussions of the issue which were planned for the Joint Conference of African Planners, Statisticians, and Demographers early in 1992. The paper was expected to have relevance as well to other sub-items under item 13.

10. Sub-item 13 (b). National Household Survey Capability Programme, and sub-item 13 (c). Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA) programme and the Living Standards Measurement Study (LSMS)

65. The Working Group requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and the World Bank to prepare jointly two reports for the sub-items. One report would provide information about the programmes and would be for information purposes; the other would be issue-oriented. The issue-oriented report, in the absence of a report on evaluation, should include relevant information on coordination and collaboration and steps taken to improve those aspects of the programmes. The Working Group believed that such a joint approach to the issue-oriented report would make it easier for the Commission to understand specific areas of agreement and disagreement between the World Bank and the Statistical Office. It was recognized that the

information report would, because of its content, have wider circulation. Both organizations planned to have consultations on the outlines of the reports.

11. Sub-item 13 (d). Monitoring the achievement of social goals in the 1990s

66. The Working Group decided that the document should be listed under both sub-item 13 (d), and sub-item 12 (b), "Development indicators", since it contained elements relevant to both technical cooperation and methodological development. The importance of consultations and the sharing of experiences among the agencies in respect of the pilot studies mentioned in section III was emphasized.

12. Item 14. Coordination and integration of international statistical programmes

67. The Working Group noted that the report of the Working Group on its fourteenth session was relevant to both item 14 and item 3, "Special topic", and should be listed under each. The Working Group stressed that the second and third documents requested, covering the work and plans in statistics of the international organizations, should be concise, contain only essential information on on-going work and highlight issues of major concern which the organizations would like to bring to the attention of the Commission.

13. Sub-item 15 (b). Programme objectives and planning

68. The Working Group recalled its decision to bring forward the discussion of the medium-term plan since it was relevant to agenda item 3, "Special topic" (see para. 40 above). The report would contain proposed revisions to the medium-term plan for 1992-1997 for advice from the Commission.

69. The Working Group welcomed the intention of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to present information on the proposed work programme for 1994-1995 in a more transparent manner, so as to facilitate discussion by the Commission. Consultations with the central planning and budgeting authorities of the United Nations would be held with that objective in mind, bearing in mind the improved way that had been adopted for presenting work-programme information to the Conference of European Statisticians.

VIII. INITIATIVES BEING UNDERTAKEN BY INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS TO ACCELERATE STATISTICAL DEVELOPMENT

70. The Working Group considered the matter on the basis of a note by the Secretary-General (E/CN.3/AC.1991/R.6) describing relevant initiatives in the fields of services statistics, environment statistics and the revision of the SNA.

71. The Working Group welcomed the report and noted that it covered the three specific initiatives requested by the Commission. It further noted that it did not cover the full array of efforts under way to coordinate and promote statistical work. The Working Group decided that any further discussion relevant to the item would be taken up under agenda item 5, "Strengthening international statistical cooperation".

IX. STRENGTHENING INTERNATIONAL STATISTICAL COOPERATION

72. The matter was discussed on the basis of introductory statements by the Chairman of the Working Group, the Director of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and the representative of the World Bank, and of notes and letters prepared by the Chairman of the Working Group, the Government Statistician of New Zealand, the Director of the Statistics Department of the International Monetary Fund, the Director of the Statistics and Information Systems Division of GATT and the Director-General of the Statistical Office of the European Communities. They had been informally circulated to members of the Working Group and/or made available during the session of the Group.

73. The Working Group recalled that the matter had been referred to it by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session. 10/ The Working Group noted the rapid economic and political changes that were occurring in many parts of the world and recognized that they had significant implications for international statistical work. Demands for statistics were escalating, along with demands for more detail, more timeliness, more comparability, and better quality in statistics, both nationally and internationally. Data comparability underpinned by internationally determined classifications and concepts was essential. The situation was made more complex because of changes under way or foreseen in the organization and definition of States in different parts of the world, including the evolution of the European Community and parallel developments, at least in terms of free trade areas and unified statistical practices, occurring or planned among groups of countries in both developed and developing regions. Resource availability for statistical work at both the national and international levels had in many cases been reduced and in virtually all situations was fully stretched. Yet statistical services had to provide for a range of continuing needs while responding to new needs for data. All of those developments placed extra pressure on statistical development at the national and international levels.

74. The Working Group noted a number of significant initiatives in international statistical cooperation in Europe. In particular it noted the initiative taken by the European Community and OECD to strengthen statistical cooperation between the two organizations in the pursuit of developing statistical standards to serve the needs of their member States. It further noted that in the interests of greater coordination and the avoidance of duplication, ECE, OECD and Eurostat would consult and formulate, pragmatically, a common approach to their respective work and harmonize their activities to the greatest extent possible. They intended subsequently to expand the cooperation to ensure that the work was consistent with what was being done in other specialized organizations with responsibility for global statistical standards in particular subject areas. Those initiatives and their possible implications beyond the European region and the membership of the three organizations had been discussed in several forums in Europe in recent months. The Working Group welcomed them as a positive set of actions which would advance coordination among the member countries of those organizations and step up work on statistical standards and methods to meet the special needs of their respective member countries. The representative of EUROSTAT indicated that the results of their efforts would be made available to contribute to development of the world system. The Working Group emphasized that it would be necessary to ensure that global standards remained in place and that those standards take account of the circumstances and needs of all countries, especially developing countries.

75. In light of the many changes that had occurred, including the recent initiatives in Europe and the resulting additional pressures on the international statistical system, the Working Group concluded that it would be appropriate at the current time to carry out a general review of the structure and operation of the global statistical system and of international statistical cooperation and to develop a plan for a global system that would be more responsive to the full range of current and emerging needs. The existing system had been well-established originally and had evolved in response to changing needs. Significant efforts had been made to foster statistical development and international statistical cooperation. However, given the recent changes, the Working Group was of the view that the resources for development and coordination could be more effectively utilized to strengthen the international system in all its aspects. The review was intended to be comprehensive. Although a number of features of the current global system might be retained, it was felt that the best approach would be to carry out a complete general review, based on the needs to be satisfied, and to determine the optimum way to meet those needs.

76. The Working Group considered that the global statistical system, like any system, could be best defined in terms of the units or elements that comprised it and the various interrelationships among them. In such a system, there would be no single hierarchy of units or entities. The Working Group identified the following elements: the Statistical Commission, its Working Group, the regional intergovernmental statistical bodies, the national statistical offices, the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat, the statistical services of the specialized agencies of the United Nations system and other international organizations and bodies such as the GATT,

OECD, and EUROSTAT, the statistical services of other parts of the United Nations Secretariat, including the United Nations regional commissions and UNCTAD. The Working Group recognized that there well might be other units in the system as well.

77. A number of observations were made about the desired character of the proposed review:

(a) It should clearly describe the present system and its goals and objectives, mechanisms, mandates and resource issues - i.e., covering and clarifying the roles and relationships of all the involved entities. In particular, it should cover the roles of the Statistical Commission, the intergovernmental statistical bodies of the regional commissions and the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat;

(b) It should take into account the consequences for the future, given present trends and present arrangements;

(c) It should go beyond a listing of shortcomings and then determine what needs to be done: define the structural arrangements, the resources needed, and a time scale for introducing any needed change;

(d) It should not be constrained by pre-conceived ideas or limits on organizational arrangements but should ultimately recognize limitations on resources; consideration of priorities would then be required;

(e) Any new structure should be enduring and dynamic, able to meet future needs including the improvement of statistical capability in countries themselves;

(f) Any new structure should promote the use of resources in the most efficient way to serve the world as a whole. It should be global in scope, integrated and complete in subject coverage. To avoid duplication of effort, it should include coordination. It should reflect needs around the world, take account of developing countries, promote more active participation by developing countries in statistical processes and ensure that countries at all levels of statistical development are consulted at least at the diagnostic stage of the development of revised or new standards so that the full range of needs can be taken into account;

(g) It should recognize the issue of institutional continuity;

(h) It should provide support for revitalizing and raising the strength of national statistical offices, since they are integral parts of the global statistical system;

(i) It should explicitly include inter-agency collaboration and its effectiveness for providing needed services to countries and promoting efficient use of resources;

(j) A pragmatic approach should be adopted for considering any restructuring possibilities.

78. The Working Group welcomed the request made by the Director of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat that an independent review of the role and work of that Office be undertaken, including how work is done, how it could be improved and how the Office could adapt to the new challenges of a rapidly changing world. It agreed that the general review would also cover the requested review of the Statistical Office. However, it stressed that the review would also need to look at the activities of other entities as well.

79. The Working Group also welcomed the Director's offer of a report to be submitted by the Secretariat to the Working Group reviewing the current global statistical system and presenting proposals for its restructuring. The report, to be issued in the name of the Secretary-General, would draw on the ideas and comments of the Working Group and the ACC Subcommittee on Statistical Activities, among others, but it would ultimately reflect the distillation of the Secretariat's thoughts and proposals on the matter.

80. The Working Group requested the Chairman to form a review group consisting of himself and others, to carry out the general review. The group would be comprised of members of the Working Group or others to be chosen by the Chairman. The group was requested to prepare its mandate and provide it to the Director of the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat for circulation to all members of the Working Group. The group was requested to complete its study in from six to eight months and prepare a report for the Working Group. The Chairman invited the members and other participants in the Working Group session to send to him, in writing, any further views or comments they might have on the issue.

81. The Working Group decided to include, as one specific aspect of the overall review, the policies and practices in the international organizations concerning the adjustment of nationally supplied statistical data. The Working Group requested GATT to work with the Chairman of the Working Group on preparing a report on the question, with the intention that it be included in the overall review report for the Commission at its next session. The group preparing the review report would examine whether that module should be broadened beyond the subject of international trade statistics. The Working Group also requested the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat to include in its report to the Working Group an indication of existing policies on the matter in the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat and an indication of what the Office would like the policy to be, in general terms.

82. The Working Group considered that the general review was of the utmost importance and priority for the Statistical Commission and recommended that the Commission consider it at its session in 1993. The Working Group decided that the most appropriate way to include the matter was to designate it as the special topic (item 3) of the agenda under the heading "Strengthening

international statistical cooperation". It also recommended bringing forward its own next session to review both of the above-mentioned reports and any related materials and, on that basis, prepare a report to the Statistical Commission on the question to facilitate the Commission's review.

X. DATES AND VENUE OF THE FIFTEENTH SESSION

83. The Working Group recalled its discussion of agenda item 5; "Strengthening international statistical cooperation" (paras. 72-82 above) and the decisions it had made on the steps to be taken towards achieving that objective. The Working Group also noted that:

(a) The topic had been specifically referred to it by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session; 10/

(b) Because of the pace of change globally and in the ECE region, it had been necessary for the Bureau of the Conference of European Statisticians to meet more frequently than heretofore;

(c) At several recent sessions of the Statistical Commission there had been calls for the Working Group to play a more active role; 11/

(d) The subject of international statistical cooperation had been identified as the topic for special discussion at the twenty-seventh session of the Commission;

(e) The subject was a complex one, having direct implications for all Member States, the United Nations Secretariat and all international organizations and other bodies dealing with international statistics.

84. In view of the importance and urgency of the issue, there was need to provide the Statistical Commission with well-considered preparations. Accordingly, the Working Group unanimously recommended that it hold its fifteenth session before the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission, devote its session principally to the issue of strengthening international statistical cooperation, and prepare a report on the issue for the twenty-seventh session of the Commission. It recommended that its fifteenth session be held in New York from 29 June to 1 July 1992.

Notes

1/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1991, Supplement No. 5 (E/1991/25), para. 164.

2/ Ibid., paras. 30, 32, 35, 38.

3/ Ibid., para. 38 (b).

4/ Ibid., chap. II, sect. B, paras. 18-27.

Notes (continued)

5/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1989, Supplement No. 3 (E/1989/21), para. 7.

6/ Ibid., 1991, Supplement No. 5 (E/1991/25), paras. 246 and 247.

7/ The Social Dimensions of Adjustment (SDA) Project: An Interim Evaluation, vols. I and II. United Nations Development Programme, Central Evaluation Office.

8/ Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 1991, Supplement No. 5 (E/1991/25), para. 245.

9/ Ibid., para. 243.

10/ Ibid., paras. 216 and 219 (a).

11/ Ibid., 1981, Supplement No. 2 (E/1981/12), chap. XI; and ibid., 1987, Supplement No. 6 (E/1987/19), chap. XII.

Annex

1. Election of officers.

2. Adoption of the agenda and other organizational matters.

3. Revision of the System of National Accounts (SNA).

4. Follow-up to the consideration by the Statistical Commission at its twenty-sixth session of the item entitled "Effects of structural adjustment programmes and the debt burden on the work programmes of national and international statistical services".

5. Strengthening international statistical cooperation.

6. Provisional agenda and documentation for the twenty-seventh session of the Statistical Commission.

7. International trade statistics:

   (a) Amendments to the Standard International Trade Classification, Revision 3 (SITC, Rev.3) in the light of the amendments to the Harmonized Commodity Description and Coding System (HS) scheduled for implementation in January 1992;

   (b) Reconciliation of international trade statistics and estimates.

8. Initiatives being undertaken by international organizations to accelerate statistical development while ensuring coordination in selected fields of statistics.

9. Coordination of the statistical data-collection activities of international organizations.

10. Evaluation of the survey programmes of the United Nations and the World Bank.

11. Dates and place of the fifteenth session.

12. Report of the Working Group on its fourteenth session.